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ON BEAUTY.*

THE author of this book is a man of a strong poetical nature, of high culture, and of varied learning. His acquirements are refreshed and stimulated by the strong currents of his own thoughts, which are set in language both choice and eloquent. Yet, in treating of Beauty, he confesses himself to be but the echo of the Grecian Plato. He says: "In the course of developing the subject for the press, I found that my leading principles, though originally elaborated with perfect independence of all authority, ancient or modern, were substantially the same as Plato's." Does this confession of Professor Blackie show a decline or stationary condition of our faculties, or of our knowledge; or is it merely an admission that the word beauty is insusceptible of a higher or better definition than that given it by Plato? Without dwelling upon either of these points, we believe that the Professor's difficulty proceeds from the inability of his own mental currents to rise above those of Plato, though two thousand years posterior to him in time. If Professor Blackie's own mind had not been procreatively cast in a mould similar to that of Plato, no such confession would have ever been made by him. While we reverence the past, and pledge our filial fealty to it, yet we believe that two thousand years have brought with them higher conceptions of Beauty; and, as a natural consequence, higher artistic expressions of it. It is a historical distortion of the progression of things to say that Heathenism evoked from the depths of the human heart, forms of Beauty equal to those called into being by the loftier spiritual principles of Christianity. Those academicians, like Professor Blackie, who study, so to speak, the statics of *words* rather than the dynamics of *things*, are constantly disembowelling the past with a view of showing the borrowed or stolen treasures of the present, being unmindful of the beautiful saying of Pascal, that *Humanity is but a man who lives perpetually and learns continually*.

The contrast between the Beautiful, as it now exists in Scotland and as it existed in the palmy days of Greece, provokes the Professor to utter the following language,* which is as applicable to us as to the Scotch or English.

"Scotland, in fact, to speak the plain truth, is a country which, while it has much to be proud of, certainly cannot congratulate itself in any way on having excelled either in the theory or the practice of the Beautiful. In these latter days, indeed, we have produced a few very reputable painters, and seem in the fair way, with God's blessing, of producing more; but we seem to have adopted painting rather as one of the needful decorations of social life, in this age of fair show and smooth refinement, than as a great gospel of the imaginative faculty which we felt ourselves under a sacred obligation to preach. If there be more in it, I thank God; and no doubt there is a great deal more in the hearts of some individual artists; but, as a people, I feel quite assured that we can in no

wise be said to breathe the living breath of Beauty, in the same sense in which that expression might, without a metaphor, have been used of the ancient Greeks. We are, in more respects, I fear a very utilitarian, a very vulgar, and a very Gothic race. Nor, indeed, is this surprising, seeing that, over and above the materializing influences of the love of money, natural to a mercantile people, and the harshness of mind engendered by the habit of political partisanship, we, in this part of the island, possess a church polity—the extreme form of naked Protestantism—which, starting from the violence of popular image-breaking, has ever maintained a character of bigoted hostility, of morbid jealousy, or of boorish indifference to all the softening influences and graceful witcheries of the Fine Arts—a polity which formally established that unnatural divorce between Beauty and Faith, which can never be made without robbing the Arts of their noblest soul, and devotion of no small charm. With the Greeks the very reverse was the case. Their religion, like all polytheism, being merely a pictorial personation of the most striking powers of nature and of the human soul, and created altogether by the devout working of the imagination, could never come into an attitude of hostility to any purely imaginative Art; but did rather by its very nature, constantly incite and stimulate the exercise of that devout plastic faculty which the one-eyed sternness of certain forms of monotheism pitilessly denounces.

"In lands where extreme Protestantism is professed, the fine arts, being thrust violently out of the house of God, are driven to seek refuge in the private parlor or in the public saloon; and the noble arts of painting and sculpture, prevented from consecrating themselves to what is sacred, are glad to obtain a meagre subsistence by ministering to personal vanity and social pomp. In this view, we cannot but admit, if we are honest, that the ancient Greeks stood far ahead of the point where the modern Britons now stand. Amid the multifarious errors of their crude and puerile theology, against which the lofty soul of Plato so indignantly protested, these ancients had at least this one good thing to set against the many good things in which our Christian superiority consists, that, if their religion was less divine than ours, their painting and sculpture, and even the trivial garniture of their daily life, was more religious. If they had less morality in their temples, they had more devotion in their pictured porticoes and in their statued streets. To them, religion, whatever might be its faults—and they are certainly neither few nor faint—never wore a grim and forbidding aspect. The message which their priests and hierophants had to deliver from their gods, however scant always, and oftentimes ambiguous, was not wont to be marred by studied savagery, and the harsh defiance of all grace in the person of its messengers. Where a golden-locked and lute-playing Apollo was worshipped, the worshippers were not apt to be deluded into the superstitious imagination that the only style of praise from mortal men in which the Supreme Being can delight, is the dismal funeral drone of a crude psalmody, removed at the greatest possible distance from every natural expression of joy and jubilation. To them, painting and sculpture were not arts invented merely or mainly for the purpose of enabling a rich huntsman to ornament the vestibule of his mountain lodge with groups of wild beasts, or that his fair lady might look upon herself painted, with her favorite parrot on her shoulder; but that our small experience of all that is glorious and beautiful in poor, shrivelled and crippled humanity, might, through the genius of a Phidias and an Alcamenes, be enriched and re-

* Three Discourses delivered in the University of Edinburgh. With an Exposition of the doctrine of the Beautiful, according to Plato. By JOHN STUART BLACKIE. Edinburgh, 1858.

freshed by the daily contemplation of perfect human joy in an Apollo, perfect human love in an Aphrodite, and perfect practical wisdom in a Minerva."

Beauty being a verbal unit of the highest psychological generalizations, every attempt to define it must end rather in loose descriptions of some of its leading constituents, than in any satisfactory definition of the word itself. Every civilized people have grown all but unconsciously into these verbal units of knowledge, and the most gifted of our race comprehend them rather synthetically than analytically, rather instinctively than logically. All questions as to beauty being a real entity in nature, independently of man's perception of it, may amuse the curious, but can have no real bearing upon the increase of our knowledge, or the satisfaction of our intellect. It is equally futile to look upon man as the generator of beauty, independently of the world by which he is surrounded, and of which he forms the crowning part. All we know is, that the perception or sensation of beauty is evolved out of the juxtaposition of the percipient and the perceived. Whether the latter is mutable or immutable it is impossible to say, as the rose or any other thing of beauty may have been eternally unchangeable in all its essential constituents. But as to man, we believe him to have been progressive in his realization of the beautiful, both in nature and humanity. The variations in men as to their capacities to reflect the beautiful in the nature without them are innumerable, and might be traced to their peculiarities of organization, as well as to the modifications to which this is subjected by the social medium in which it has its growth and being. There are certain social combinations which are favorable to the growth of Art as well as to the evolution of beauty; there are others poisonous to both. Beauty is not the result of man's will, but of forces within him which are quite as much due to his antecedents as to the concomitants of his individual existence. When beauty is born through the medium of art, it is from a happy union of man with the universe in which he lives—a union that has love for its base, and not analytical criticism. Beauty has never had its root in a few isolated and heterogeneous particulars, but bodies forth from a deep and wide harmony of generalities which bind together the thing reflected with that in which it has its reflection. Is the eye of the artist but a mere inlet through which outward nature literally reflects herself on his canvas? Not at all. Man, the artist, in loving contact with outward nature, generates a thing of beauty, which, while partaking of both, is different from both, and marks a progression on the ascending scale of beauty; otherwise it is imitation, and not Art.

To a poet nothing can be useless. Whatever is beautiful, and whatever is dreadful, must be familiar to his imagination: he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast, or elegantly little. The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety.—*Dr. Johnson.*

GLIMPSSES OF MUNICH,

FROM "AN ART-STUDENT IN MUNICH."

NUMBER TWO.

From the studio of Kaulbach we pass to the miracle play at Ober-Ammergan. This play is performed by the peasants of that and the neighboring villages in fulfillment of a vow made during the terrible pestilence in 1663. When the plague was at its height the peasants vowed to God that if He would stay its fury they would perform every ten years, in token of deep gratitude, and as a means of religious instruction, the whole Passion of our Saviour, from his entrance into Jerusalem to his Ascension. The journey by still-wagon to the Bavarian highlands, the assembling of a great multitude of German peasants from the whole country for many leagues around, their earnest, simple, religious interest in the tedious, yet quaint and serious performance, and the performance itself, which lasted, with only an hour's intermission, from eight o'clock in the morning till five in the afternoon, are admirably described in detail, and the whole adventure makes on the mind of the reader, as it must have done on that of the writer, the impression of a fantastic, yet beautiful dream.

We go to the studio of the late sculptor Schwanthaler—

"The Schwanthaler Strasse, like most of the streets in the newer quarters of Munich, spite of its gaily painted houses, with their tints of pale greens, pinks, greys, and salmon colors, their long rows of bright windows, and often their clustering vines and creepers, through which peeps forth here and there the white statue of the Madonna and Child, or a fresco of the Madonna or some saint, has a strange air of quietness, almost of desertion about it. No one is seen passing to and fro,—all is silent, as if sunk in a calm dream.

"The little court-yard of Schwanthaler's studio is especially quiet, and the gravel is thickly sprinkled with small weeds. The folding-doors of the studio open,—and as we step into the long gallery, before us rise, relieving themselves against a dull red wall, the colossal figures of the *Hermann Schlacht* or 'Battle of Arminius'—the frieze for the northern pediment of the Walhalla at Ratisbon. Hermann, in his winged helmet, grasps his terrific sword, pausing for a moment in his slaughter; his strong feet press the reeds and mosses of the morass, like the feet of a destroying angel,—his matted locks are blown back from his relentless brows, and he gazes down on the fallen and struggling foes around him. On the one hand are the Roman combatants: on the other, a bard, a female seer, with loosened hair wreathed with oak-leaves, and face raised with a wild visionary look about it, and Hermann's old dying father,—Hermann's wife, an Amazonian woman, bending over him. We stand in the very heart of the old German world,—are transported to those mighty forests inhabited by a Titanic race and by fabulous dragons. We are among beings of an elder world, large of limb, and of perfect proportions. They have had space and time to develop themselves in those primordial forests. They are not savages; it is not mere physical strength and beauty that they possess. They are endowed with a strange intellectual beauty and power that make the gazer breathless. With the grandeur and simplicity and power of the antique, the sculptor has united a fresh element—the wild mysterious